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# Dr. B. R. Ambedkar on the Aryan Invasion and the Emergence of the Caste System in India

Arvind Sharma

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The advent of the Aryans in India in the second millennium B.C.E. has long been considered a pivotal event in the history of the subcontinent, a view now under contestation academically (as well as politically by the Hindu Right). It has gone unnoticed in this context that one of the earliest coherent critiques of this regnant paradigm was offered by an opponent of the Hindu Right, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar (1892–1956). His views on the Aryan invasion and the emergence of the caste system in India—the subject of this article—far from being preciously esoteric, speak on at least three conceptual registers: (1) their biographical significance when compared to the views of B. G. Tilak (1856–1920), Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru (1889–1964), and, Ambedkar's predecessor, Mahatma Jyotiba Phule (1827–1890); (2) their political significance in the role of Ambedkar, first as an *opponent* of the Brahmanical vision of the Hindu nation represented for him not only by the Mahasabha and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) but the Gandhian Congress as well, then as the *proponent* of constitutionalism after the attainment of Indian independence in 1947, involving a simultaneous commitment to majority rule and minority protection, and later as the *exponent* of the exercise of Buddhist option out of Hinduism for the Dalits in 1956, and (3) finally,

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posthumously, as relevant to the current academic debate around ethnogenesis in South Asia.

## THE ARYAN INVASION OF INDIA

According to a regnant paradigm of ancient Indian history, India was invaded<sup>1</sup> around 1500 B.C.E. by a people who called themselves Aryans and possessed physical and cultural features quite distinct from the earlier inhabitants of India. After their successful invasion these people tried to safeguard these distinctive features against their dilution in the new environment through a form of social organization now known as the caste system; and this form of social organization has since constituted the defining feature of classical Hindu religion, society, and history (Basham 1999: 35, 137–138; 1989: 24–27).

The Indians, especially the Hindus (Keay: 27), had taken it for granted until the middle of the nineteenth century that they were the original inhabitants of India. Hence this new paradigm was a revolutionary formulation, yet its success was as complete in the Indological sphere<sup>2</sup> as the success of the British arms in India. Although the paradigm is now being increasingly contested (Bryant), it holds virtually complete sway in serious academic discourse both in India and in the West. Current scholarly consensus stands by the paradigm while permitting debate on it (Mallory 2002: 273–274; 2003: 107–240).

It comes as a matter of some surprise then that this paradigm was comprehensively challenged by Ambedkar as early as 1946, if not earlier (Dirks: 267). It is a matter of further surprise that little attention has been paid to Ambedkar's erudite critique (Keer: 386). What is more, the regnant paradigm is now being intellectually challenged by the Hindutva forces in India, and yet Ambedkar's work has attracted little attention, even though it anticipates this new questioning, and even some of its

<sup>1</sup> There is an increasing tendency to refer to it as immigration rather than invasion (Bryant: 309; Keay: 24–29), or even as diffusion (Thapar: 215).

<sup>2</sup> One might cite the following fact as evidence of its triumph. The Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan of Bombay has published a ten-volume series entitled *History and Culture of the Indian People* under the general editorship of R. C. Majumdar, all the contributors to which are, on principle, Indians. In the context of the current culture wars in India, this series is even suspect as Hindu nationalist in inspiration. Yet its first volume, *The Vedic Age*, subscribes to the standard paradigm. The only exception is an appendix to chapter 10 entitled "India, the Original Home of the Aryans" by S. Srikanta Sastri (Majumdar: 215–217). It attracted the attention of A. L. Basham, who notes in his comment on the volume that "a brief appendix outlines the arguments in favour of the theory that the original home of the Aryans was India" (1964: 228). But he also adds that for its inclusion "the chief editor is frankly apologetic: 'Although few scholars today believe India to be the original home of the Aryans this theory has naturally a sentimental appeal to Indians and has therefore been discussed in some detail in an appendix to Chapter X'" (1964: 228).

arguments, by more than fifty years. Still more surprising is the fact that western scholarship, which is generally supportive of the Dalit cause and the Dalit point of view as expressed by Ambedkar (Hay: 324–326; 339–340), has also sedulously ignored it. Even Ambedkar's followers seem content with merely summarizing his views *en passant* (Chentharassery: chaps. I, II).

The purpose of this article is to present Ambedkar's critique of the western paradigm and to assess it critically.

## UNIQUENESS OF AMBEDKAR'S VIEWS

Before one proceeds with this critical examination, however, a singular fact needs to be recognized—that when Ambedkar offered his views against a trans-Indian origin of the Indian people, he was ploughing a lonely furrow. How lonely a furrow he was ploughing may be judged from the fact that other political leaders who had ventured in the field had accepted unquestioningly the idea of a trans-Indian origin of the Indian peoples. B. G. Tilak (1856–1920) had in fact even located the Aryan homeland in the Arctic Circle, a view Ambedkar makes short shrift of (Ambedkar: 69). Nehru also accepted the trans-Indian origin of the Aryans axiomatically (61). That Nehru specially refers to the fact of Mahatma Gandhi not being a Brahmin (77) suggests an awareness of the political implications of the theory. What is striking is that these two nationalists of Brahmin pedigree found no difficulty in reconciling this theory with their nationalism. This would not surprise Ambedkar, because he accused the Brahmins of basking in the reflected glory of their Aryan origin (Ambedkar: 76). This may help explain why the political contestation of the Aryan invasion is a relatively recent development even in Hindutva circles. Hindutva's founder, V. D. Savarkar (1883–1966), accepted this view (Savarkar). A major Hindutva stalwart, M. S. Golwalkar (d. 1973), tried to reconcile Tilak's view of an Arctic origin with indigenous nationalism by locating the Arctic region itself in India (near Bihar and Bengal), in view of the shift to which the polar axis is liable, in remote antiquity (Golwalkar; Bryant: 272–273). Balraj Madhok (1920–) marks the transition to a wholly indigenous view of Aryan origin (Madhok). These developments make it possible to propose that just as the Aryan invasion theory allowed the higher castes to identify with the ruler in British times, the indigenous origin theory enables this allegiance to be transferred to the ruled (and now the rulers) in a democratic India.

The Aryan invasion theory thus remains as significant politically as academically and was used against the higher castes as well. The theory was accepted by Jyotiba Phule (1827–1890), who championed the rights of the non-Brahmins against the Brahmins in Maharashtra. Ambedkar

dedicates the book, whose contents will soon be reviewed, entitled *Who Were the Shudras?* to Mahatma Jyotiba Phule with the following inscription: "The Greatest Shudra of modern India who made the lower classes of Hindus conscious of their slavery to the higher classes and who preached the gospel that for India social democracy was more vital than independence from foreign rule" (v). For Phule, the master key for understanding the domination of the non-Brahmins by the Brahmins was provided by the fact of Aryan invasion, which allowed the Aryan Brahmins to assume the position of hierarchical dominance they have since enjoyed (Patil; O'Hanlon). It is therefore striking that despite such strong affinity in terms of ideology, Ambedkar argues *against* the basic historical assumption that undergirds the Aryan invasion theory in a book that is itself reverentially dedicated to Phule. It means, at the very least, that Ambedkar's view must be taken seriously into account.

### AMBEDKAR'S SYSTEMATIC CRITIQUE OF THE ARYAN INVASION AND ITS ACADEMIC ASSESSMENT

Ambedkar summarizes the existing paradigm in the form of the following seven propositions:

- (1) The people who created the Vedic literature belonged to the Aryan race; (2) This Aryan race came from outside India and invaded India; (3) The natives of India were known as Dasas and Dasyus who were racially different from the Aryans; (4) The Aryans were a white race. The Dasas and Dasyus were a dark race; (5) The Aryans conquered the Dasas and Dasyus; (6) The Dasas and Dasyus after they were conquered and enslaved were called Shudras; (7) The Aryans cherished colour prejudice and therefore formed the *Chaturvarnya* whereby they separated the white race from the black race such as the Dasas and the Dasyus. (57–58)

The first proposition, that the people who created the Vedic literature belonged to the Aryan race, leads Ambedkar into an investigation of the concepts of "race" and "Aryan." Ambedkar makes three important points in relation to the term "race." He first points out that it is possible to mistake a people for a race—and cites W. E. Ripley to the effect that this is precisely what has happened in relation to the Jews (58–59). The second point he makes is that although at one time the following four elements were used to determine race: (1) form of head; (2) color of hair and eyes; (3) color of skin; and (4) stature, the current opinion, at the time Ambedkar was writing, relied on anthropometry to determine race—that is to say, the head had come out ahead as the marker of the race, and the measurement of the head required the calculation of (1) the cephalic index and (2) the

facial index. The third point Ambedkar makes has to do with the existing classification of races: of European racial types into Teutonic, Alpine (Celtic), and Mediterranean as proposed by W. E. Ripley. Out of these three both the Teutonic and the Mediterranean were characterized by long head and long face. The Aryan race is also characterized by a long head (was dolichocephalic). Ambedkar then notes that as both of the two races mentioned earlier are long-headed, the question "still remains open" (64).

However, Ambedkar goes on to state that it is doubtful whether the Aryans could be referred to as a race. Thus, although W. E. Ripley is prepared to speak of an Aryan racial type (60), Max Müller demurs, for he states:

There is no Aryan race in blood; Aryan, in scientific language, is utterly inapplicable to race. It means language and nothing but language; and if we speak of Aryan race at all, we should know that it means no more than . . . Aryan speech.

I have declared again and again that if I say Aryas, I mean neither blood nor bones, nor hair nor skull; I mean simply those who speak an Aryan language. The same applies to Hindus, Greeks, Romans, Germans, Celts and Slavs. When I speak of them I commit myself to no anatomical characteristics. The blue-eyed and fair-haired Scandinavians may have been conquerors or conquered, they may have adopted the language of their darker lords or their subjects, or *vice versa*. I assert nothing beyond their language, when I call them Hindus, Greeks, Romans, Germans, Celts and Slavs; and in that sense, and in that sense only, do I say that even the blackest Hindus represent an earlier state of Aryan speech and thought than the fairest Scandinavians. This may seem strong language, but in matters of such importance we cannot be too decided in our language. To me, an ethnologist who speaks of Aryan race, Aryan blood, Aryan eyes and hair, is as great a sinner as a linguist who speaks of a dolichocephalic dictionary or a brachycephalic grammar. It is worse than a Babylonian confusion of tongues—it is downright theft. We have made our own terminology for the classification of language; let ethnologists make their own for the classification of skulls, and hair and blood. (62–63)

Ambedkar goes on to add after citing this passage of Max Müller: "The value of this view of Prof. Max Müller will be appreciated by those who know that he was at one time a believer in the theory of the Aryan race and was largely responsible for the propagation of it" (63).<sup>3</sup> Moreover,

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<sup>3</sup> Ambedkar here anticipates a point made half a century after him by Romila Thapar (224 n2): "Max Müller's statement about the Aryan nation as the physical manifestation of Aryan culture lent support to the search for the Aryan race. His later repeated attempts to deny the existence of an Aryan race were often ignored."

the two views regarding the significance of the word *Aryan* “are obviously not in harmony. According to one view, the Aryan race existed in a physiological sense with typical hereditary traits, with a fixed cephalic and facial index. According to Prof. Max Müller, the Aryan race existed only in a philological sense, as a people speaking a common language” (63). Ambedkar then proceeds to ask the question: Did the Aryans think of themselves as a race? According to Ambedkar the word *Ārya* is used in the *RgVeda* in “31 places. But in none of these is the word used in the sense of race” (63–64).<sup>4</sup>

The debate regarding the word *Ārya* is an ongoing one, although scholarly opinion in general favors its use in a linguistic rather than a racial sense. Nevertheless, the racial dimension has not quite died out and may even be said to have been revived with the use of genetics in determining patterns of ethnogenesis, specially in South Asia. The recent Bamshad study is a case in point. Most scholars, however, mean a “people who spoke Vedic Sanskrit” rather than a race when they use the word *Aryan*. In this respect Ambedkar’s effort to focus on the word *Ārya* is helpful. As Vincent A. Smith pointed out as early as at least the 1920s: “In fact, the accepted belief in the Indo-Aryan immigration from Central Asia depends largely on the interpretation of the geographical allusions in the *Rigveda* and the *Yajurveda*. Direct testimony to the assumed fact is lacking, and no tradition of an early home beyond the frontier survives in India” (25). The passage is retained without change by Percival Spear right into the 1950s, testifying to its continuing relevance (Spear: 53). That is to say, because the evidence of Aryan invasion or immigration is linguistic in nature, that is where the emphasis must rest, for as T. Burrow points out: “The Aryan invasion of India is recorded in no written document, and it cannot be traced archeologically, but it is nevertheless firmly established as a historical fact on the basis of comparative philology” (21).

If one were to assess Ambedkar’s remarks in the light of the above discussion, then the following points could be made: Ambedkar has not produced a philological refutation of the Indo-European linguistic hypothesis, so that the view that Indo-Aryan speakers may have moved into India through invasion or immigration remains unaffected. On the other hand, his criticism of the racial (as distinguished from the linguistic) interpretation of the word *Aryan* is well taken. Recent linguistic studies

<sup>4</sup> There is some uncertainty in Ambedkar’s writing regarding the exact number of times the word *Ārya* occurs in the *RgVeda*. In the above citation thirty-one occurrences are mentioned. Subsequently he cites P. T. Srinivasa Iyengar to the effect that in the *RgVeda*, “which contains 153,972 words on the whole,” the word “*Ārya* occurs about 33 times” (Ambedkar: 70). In Appendix II, thirty-four occurrences seem to have been listed (246).



may actually serve to confirm it. For instance, it was at one time supposed that the Aryans described the people they opposed as “without a nose,” hence flat nosed. This was taken to be the meaning of the word *anās* in *ṚgVeda* 5.29.10, the only place where the word occurs. The compound, however, can be broken up either as *a-nās* (without nose) or *an-ās* (without face or mouth). Indian commentators favor the latter interpretation, as noted by H. H. Wilson (276–277). Later western scholars such as Macdonell and Keith (vol. 1, 347–378), however, favor the meaning “noseless.” Scholarly consensus now favors the traditional interpretation as all the other epithets in the verse itself refer to speech.<sup>5</sup> This is not to say that no evidence at all can be adduced in favor of interpreting *anās* as “without a nose,” apart from the etymologically speculative approach of Max Müller (Bevan: 423).

In this respect Ambedkar is vindicated. His analysis of the word *Ārya*, however, in this context may not be conclusive. The quantitative statement that it occurs only thirty odd times in the *ṚgVeda* conceals the qualitative fact that it occurs on occasion with the word *varṇa*, which at the very least might be taken to indicate a group or class (*ṚgVeda* 2.12.4; 1.179.6; 9.71.2; 3.34.9; 4.16.13; 9.41.1; 1.104.2). The fact that *Āryavarṇa* and *Dāsavarṇa* are spoken of in *ṚgVeda* thus indicates that a group consciousness is involved, which *could* be based on difference in physical complexion, although not on physiognomic facial differences such as the shape of the nose.

On the whole, though, Ambedkar seems to be right in claiming that the Aryans be regarded as “Indo-Aryan speaking peoples,” rather than a “race,” on the *basis of linguistic evidence*. This qualification is necessary in view of some recent attempts to establish such racial links on the basis of genetic evidence (Bamshad; but also see Majumdar 2001). The fact that the word *Aryan* also appears “as the self-designation of the Iranians in

<sup>5</sup> In this respect Ambedkar had uncannily anticipated the current view: “The term *Anasa* occurs in *Rig Veda* v.29.10. What does the word mean? There are two interpretations. One is by Prof. Max Müller. The other is by Sayanacharya. According to Prof. Max Müller, it means ‘one without nose’ or ‘one with a flat nose’ and has as such been relied upon as a piece of evidence in support of the view that the Aryans were a separate race from the Dasyus. Sayanacharya says that it means ‘mouthless,’ i.e., devoid of good speech. This difference of meaning is due to difference in the correct reading of the word ‘*Anasa*.’ Sayanacharya read it as *an-asa* while Prof. Max Müller reads it as *a-nasa*. As read by Prof. Max Müller, it means ‘without nose.’ Question is: which of the two readings is the correct one? There is no reason to hold that Sayana’s reading is wrong. On the other hand there is every thing to suggest that it is right. In the first place, it does not make non-sense of the word. Secondly, as there is no other place where the Dasyus are described as noseless, there is no reason why the word should be read in such a manner as to give it an altogether new sense. It is only fair to read it as a synonym of *Mridhravak*. There is therefore no evidence in support of the conclusion that the Dasyus belonged to a different race” (72).



the Avestan literature" (Possehl and Witzel: 392), which bears close linguistic affinity to Vedic literature, supports this view.

The second proposition states that the Aryan race came from outside India and invaded India. Ambedkar argues against both the points: that the Aryans came from "outside" India and that they "invaded" India. The key question to answer according to him is "From where did the Aryan race come into India?" (64). Ambedkar begins by pointing out the basis on which the Aryan homeland is identified. In doing so he cites Isaac Taylor, who summarizes the views of Benfey. Benfey argued that the primitive Aryan vocabulary did not contain words for such Asian animals as lion, tiger, or camel and for the palm (and coconut) tree. On the other hand, it contains words for such animals as bear and wolf and such trees as beech and birch, which are indigenous to Europe. These considerations pointed to Europe rather than Asia as the original home of the Aryans (Ambedkar: 64).

Ambedkar is not entirely convinced of the validity of the procedure, whose germ he traces back to Bopp's *Comparative Grammar*. According to Ambedkar

Dr. Bopp demonstrated that a greater number of languages of Europe and some languages of Asia must be referred to a common ancestral speech. The European languages and Asiatic languages to which Bopp's proposition applied are called Indo-Germanic. Collectively, they have come to be called the Aryan languages largely because Vedic language refers to the Aryas and is also of the same family as the Indo-Germanic. This assumption is the major premise on which the theory of the Aryan race is based. (74)

Nevertheless he is prepared to stay the course. But after citing Benfey's view that the Aryans originated in the "region north of the Black Sea" (65) and Geiger's view that they came from central and western Germany, and criticising Tilak's view that they came from the Arctic Circle (69), he points to India.

According to Ambedkar there is hardly any place outside India which can be sustained as the original homeland of the Aryans. On the other hand, Ambedkar maintains that "so far as the *Rig Veda* is concerned, there is not a particle of evidence suggesting the invasion of India by Aryans from outside India" (69). He then cites two scholars in support. One is P. T. Srinivasa Iyengar, who points out:

A careful examination of the *Mantras* where the words Arya, Dasa and Dasyu occur, indicates that they refer not to race but to cult. There words occur mostly in *Rig Veda Samhita* where *Arya* occurs about 33

times in *mantras* which contain 153,972 words on the whole. This rare occurrence is itself a proof that the tribes that called themselves *Aryas* were not invaders that conquered the country and exterminated the people. For an invading tribe would naturally boast of its achievements constantly. (Ambedkar: 69–70)

The other scholar he cites in support is D. S. Trivedi, who draws attention to the mention of the seven rivers in the *ṚgVeda* and remarks “the rivers are addressed as ‘my Ganges, my Yamuna, my Sarasvati’ and so on. No foreigner would ever address a river in such familiar and endearing terms unless by long association he had developed an emotion about it” (Ambedkar: 70). Ambedkar again remarkably anticipates the significance of the evidence of the rivers mentioned in the *ṚgVeda* in the context of determining their habitat, although it has been utilized in a slightly different way. The *Nadistuti* of the *ṚgVeda* (10.75) in its fifth stanza “gives a list of ten streams, small and great, in order from *east to west*” (Spear: 53, emphasis supplied) which seems to suggest an eastern rather than a western geographical orientation.

The next point pertains to the question of “invasion,” which implies “subjugation” of the existing peoples. The discussion here anticipates the identification of these people as *Dāsas* and *Dasyus* which is addressed in the next section. Ambedkar makes two points: (1) that the level of conflict implied in the *ṚgVeda* between the Aryans and the *Dāsas* and *Dasyus* is not such as to warrant a terminology of invasion and subjugation, and (2) the *Dāsas* and *Dasyus*, according to him, appear to be a group of people reflecting an inner division within the Vedic peoples rather than a distinction between Vedic and non-Vedic people. Here Ambedkar notes: “the paucity of references in the *Rig Veda* to wars between the Aryans on the one hand and the *Dasas* or *Dasyus* on the other. Out of the 33 places in which the word occurs in the *Rig Veda* only in 8 places is it used in opposition to *Dasas* and only in 7 places is it used in opposition to the word *Dasyus*. This may show the occurrence of sporadic riots between the two. It is certainly not evidence of a conquest or subjugation” (70). Moreover, the fact that in several hymns<sup>6</sup> the Aryans and the *Dāsas* together make common cause against an enemy seems to indicate that “whatever conflict there was between them and the Aryans, the two seem to have arrived at a mutual settlement based on peace and honour” (70). The much more significant point Ambedkar develops in this context is that the difference between the Aryans and at least the *Dasyus* was cultic

<sup>6</sup> *ṚgVeda* 6.33.3; 7.83.1; 8.51.9; and 10.102.3.

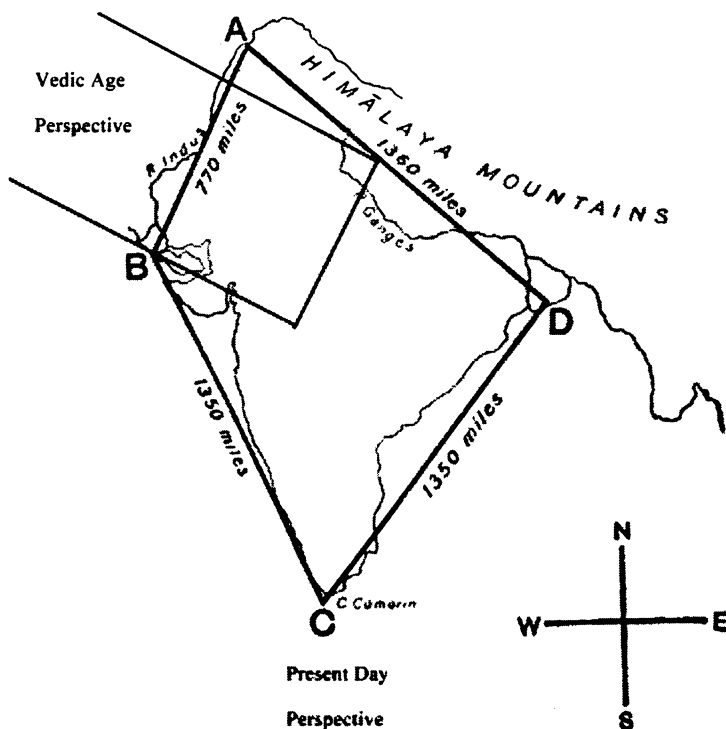
rather than racial (71). Ambedkar argues that when the Dasyus are distinguished from the Aryans they are described as *avrata* or without Aryan rites (1.51.8–9; 1.132.4; 4.41.2; 6.14.4) or with different (*anyavrata*) or deviant (*apavrata*) rites (4.42.2; 8.59.11; 10.22.8); *anagnitra* or without fire (5.189.3); *ayajyu*, *ayajvan* or without sacrifice (1.131.44; 1.33.4; 8.59.11); *anindra* or without Indra (1.133.1; 5.2.3; 7.18.6; 10.27.6; 10.48.7); and *abrahma* and *anrichah* or without prayers (or priests) and hymns (4.15.9; 10.105.8). They do not give gifts to Brahmins (5.7.10) and in fact hate prayers or Brahmins (5.42.9). These facts, coupled with the statement in *RgVeda* 10.22.8, wherein the Aryans speak of living in the midst of the Dasyu tribes but stigmatize them as less than human because they “do not perform sacrifices nor believe in anything” and have their own rites, convinces Ambedkar that the differences are not racial but “religious” or cultic.

Several observations are called for in response to these remarks. (1) The evidence for the arrival of the Aryans from beyond India is essentially *linguistic* and not literary in nature. It is based on historical philology and although Ambedkar makes short work of Bopp’s thesis, historical linguistics has almost attained the status of a science, including the ability to predict. (2) One can disentangle the “fact” of Aryans entering India from that of their homeland. One may not be certain where they came from, but one could still be reasonably certain that they came from outside India. (3) The paucity of references to conflict may be misleading if their intensity is not recognized. Ambedkar’s toned-down view of conflict is not entirely reconcilable with the following scenario: “The main work of destroying the settlements of the Dāsas had been accomplished some time before the composition of the hymns, and the great battles which must have taken place are already misted over with legend; but the Dāsas were still capable of massing armies of 10,000 men against the invaders” (Basham: 32). (4) Present-day Indological discourse has moved away from “race” to “people.” One talks less of an Aryan race and more of the Indo-Aryan speaking peoples, so that in attacking race one is now attacking a straw figure. (5) Similarly, the concept of “invasion” is now being rapidly displaced by that of immigration. Thus John Keay may be cited as a representative of combined and synthesized current scholarship on the point as follows:

Admittedly, indeed on their own admission, the *ārya* cattle-rustlers of the Rig Veda did antagonise the *dāsa*. But they also compromised with them, adopting *dāsa* technology, *dāsa* cults and *dāsa* vocabulary, and inducting *dāsa* clans and leaders into their society. Despite the importance attached to the purity of Sanskrit, there is even a hint of *dāsa-ārya*

bilingualism. With the horse and the chariot by way of a dazzling new technology, and with the subtleties of ritual sacrifice as a mesmerising ideology, the *ārya* may have secured recognition of their superiority by a process no more deliberate and menacing than social attraction and cultural osmosis; thus the Aryan invasion and conquest of India could be as much a “myth” and a “red herring” as the existence of an Aryan race. (29, diacritics supplied)

(6) One of the arguments against the advent of the Aryans into India is the lack of archeological evidence to support it. There is, however, archeological evidence in favor of the movements of Indo-Aryan peoples from Central Asia outwards, and this point needs to be borne in mind. (7) What we mean by “India” is also significant here. We are now cartographically used to taking a vertical view of India, but India of the days we are talking about was more diagonal in nature—more like Aśoka’s India than the Indian Republic of today. The following sketch may help clarify the picture.



In other words, Ambedkar may have been even prophetically right in insisting that no Aryan “race” “invaded” “India” from outside, yet this does not rule out the possibility that Indo-Aryan speaking peoples might have migrated into, occupied, and moved around in the region depicted in the *RgVeda*.

The preceding discussion segues neatly into the next proposition; that “the natives of India were known as Dasas and Dasyus and were racially different from the Aryans.” Ambedkar treats this issue as the obverse of the question whether the Aryans constituted a race or not. According to Ambedkar those who propose interpreting the terms *Dāsa* and *Dasyu* in racial terms rely on one epithet applied to the *Dāsas* and two to the *Dasyus*. In *RgVeda* 6.47.21 the *Dāsas* are called *kṛṣṇa-yoni*, or of dark birth. Ambedkar considers this evidence flimsy because it is the only time *Dāsas* are described as such, and it is not at all clear whether the word is used literally or figuratively and whether it is used descriptively or pejoratively. On the other hand, *RgVeda* 6.22.10 speaks of Indra converting *Āryas* into *Dāsas*, 10.49.3 of the conversion of *Āryas* into *Dasyus*, whereas 1.151.8 calls upon Indra to separate the two out. Hence Ambedkar concludes: “What do these verses indicate? They indicate that the distinction between the Aryans on the one hand and the Dasas and Dasyus on the other was not a racial distinction of colour or physiognomy. That is why a Dasa or Dasyu could become an Arya. That is why Indra was given the task to separate them from the Arya” (73).

In the case of the *Dasyus* the two epithets involved are (1) *anās* (5.29.10) and (2) *mṛdhravāk*. The former has been discussed earlier. The latter term appears in several hymns<sup>7</sup> and the question naturally arises “What does the adjective *mridhravak* mean? *Mridhravak* means one who speaks crude, unpolished language. Can crude unpolished language be regarded as evidence of difference of race? It would be childish to rely upon this as a basis of consciousness of race difference” (Ambedkar: 72). Some have tried to connect the word *mṛdhrvāk* with the word *mleccha* (Pusalkar: 260–261), and should this link be accepted, then Ambedkar’s view receives striking support from the fact that “one of the synonyms for *Ārya* given in certain Tamil lexicons is *mleccha* and it is used for one who cannot speak Tamil” (Thapar: 156), indicating that even when such words migrated into Tamil their referent remained purely linguistic and cultural.

<sup>7</sup> *RgVeda* 1.174.2; 5.32.8; 7.6.3; and 7.18.3. R. S. Sharma (15 n8) also adds 5.29.10 while noting its omission by Ambedkar.

The key element in this proposition consists of determining the basis of the difference among the major groupings of the population: the Aryans, on the one hand, and the Dāsas and Dasyus, on the other. Ambedkar is of the opinion that the differences between the two are religious or cultic and *not* racial, i.e., based on physiognomic distinctions. Where does present-day Indology stand on this point?

Scholars in the field seem to be divided into two groups: (1) those who argue that, although cultural explanations of the differences have been proposed, they are partially racial (Sharma: 10–17); and (2) those who argue that although the differences seem to be racial, they could as well be cultic (Kane: 26–27).

Thus the issue whether they are to be distinguished and the nature of their relationship with the Aryans remains unresolved. Those, however, who insist on a racial distinction between the Aryans, on the one hand, and Dāsas and Dasyus, on the other, emphasize the difference in the color of their complexion which leads to the next proposition examined by Ambedkar: “The Aryans were a white race. The Dasas and Dasyus were a dark race” (58).

Ambedkar’s rebuttal here takes the tack that the European races were themselves dark, and he cites professor Ripley to that effect; and that the application of the word “color” (79) and even “dark color” (73) to the Dāsas and Dasyus does not settle the issue. In the former case we do not know what *varṇa* means: color or class, and to accept the former sense begs the issue. In the latter case we do not know whether the use is literal or metaphorical. Finally, he absolves the Aryans of color prejudice because the various references to color fade away upon examination. *ṚgVeda* 1.117.8 refers to marriage between “*Shyavya* [who] is black and *Rushati* [who] is fair”; *ṚgVeda* 1.117.5 speaks of Vandanā of golden color saved by the Aśvins, who are dark, whereas in *ṚgVeda* 2.3.9 the *devas* are urged to bless the petitioner with a child of tawny (*piśaṅga*) complexion. Thus, the Aryans were not of one color nor monochromatic in their preferences. Sages Dīrghatamas and Kaṇva in the *ṚgVeda* (10.31.11) are reputed to have been dark, as also Rāma and Kṛṣṇa in later literature (Ambedkar: 77–78).

The fifth proposition: “The Aryans conquered the Dasas and Dasyus” has been examined *inter alia*, so we may move on to the sixth: “The Dāsas and Dasyus after they were conquered and enslaved were called Shudras.”

This is an extremely significant proposition, as it forges a link between Vedic Hinduism and classical Hinduism. Perhaps in view of its importance, Ambedkar cites P. V. Kane to elaborate the point:

The word ‘Dāsa’ in later literature means a “serf or a slave.” It follows that the Dāsa tribes that we see opposed to the Aryas in the *ṚgVeda* were

gradually vanquished and were then made to serve the Aryas. In the Manusmṛti (VIII, 413) the Śūdra is said to have been created by God for service (*dāśya*) of the Brāhmaṇa. We find it in the Tai. Saṁhitā, the Tai. Brāhmaṇa, and other Brāhmaṇa works that the Śūdra occupied the same position that he does in the Smṛtis. Therefore it is reasonable to infer that the *Dāsas* or *Dasyus* conquered by the Aryans were gradually transformed into the Śūdra. (Ambedkar: 104–105, diacritics supplied)<sup>8</sup>

Ambedkar subjects this proposition to such a microscopic examination that it is best to summarize his position in the form of eight probing questions (105–120): 1) Are *Dāsas* and *Dasyus* one and the same people? 2) Are they and Śūdras one and the same people? 3) Are the words *Dāsas* and *Dasyus* used in a racial sense? 4) Is there anything to indicate that they were the native tribes of India? 5) Were these “natives” savages? 6) Are Śūdras non-Aryan? 7) Are *Dāsas* described as slaves in the *R̥gVeda*? 8) Are the *Dāsas* the same as the Śūdras?

Ambedkar’s responses are now summarized: 1) Are the *Dāsas* and *Dasyus* one and the same people? Ambedkar concludes that although some references “suggest that Dasas and Dasyus were the same, there are other references which suggest that they were different. This is clear from the fact that the Dasas are referred to separately in 54 places and the Dasyus are referred to separately in 78 places. Why should there be so many separate references if they did not form two distinct communities? The probability is that they refer to two different communities” (106). Ambedkar’s intuition in this respect has received much (though not unanimous) support (Sharma: 11; Matas: 36–40; Parpola: 148–152). 2) Are they and the Śūdras one and the same people? To answer this question one has to ask: Who are the Śūdras? Two answers are discussed by Ambedkar; one traditional, the other historical. The traditional explanation, relying on *Vedānta Sūtra* (1.3.34) derives the word *Śūdra* from the root *śūc*, to grieve, hence “a sorrowful people,” so also according to *Visnu Purāṇa* (Ambedkar: 107; Sharma: 43–44). The historical explanation connects them with a people with that tribal appellation (Ambedkar: 108). Ambedkar is on solid ground here.

3) Are the words *Dāsa* and *Dasyu* used in a racial sense? Ambedkar cites a verse from the *Mahābhārata* to the effect that *Dasyus* are to be found in all the *varṇas* and in all the *āśramas*. This clearly supports the view that the word is “used to denote persons who did not observe the Aryan form of religion” (Ambedkar: 108). (He could have similarly

<sup>8</sup> Also see P. V. Kane: 33.



argued that people of all the four *varṇas*, including *śūdras*, could become a *dāsa* [*Manusmṛti* 9.179], which would similarly indicate that the word *dāsa* means *any* slave.) So much for the traditional evidence. On the historical side, Ambedkar proposes an identification of the *Dāsa* with *Azhi-dahaka*, the stinging dragon in the *Zend Avesta* and of the *Dasyus* with the pejorative description as such of the Indo- Iranians by the Indo- Aryans. It is difficult to pronounce on the first identification (although Ambedkar cites *ṚgVeda* 10.99.6 in support), but the Avestan connection whose exact reference he regrets losing(!) (109 n7) has received surprising support from recent research by George Thompson.

4) Is there anything to indicate that *Dāsa* and *Dasyus* were the native tribes of India? Not if they are identified with the Indo- Iranians (Parpola: 149–152).

5) Were these people (*Dāsas*, *Dasyus*), if assumed to be native, savages? The fact that verses in the *ṚgVeda* describe them as living in cities, accumulating wealth, owning property and jewels, occupying fortifications, etc. tells against their savage status (Ambedkar: 110–111). Ambedkar mentions a fact here that has a direct bearing on current controversies. The absence of the horse in Harappan civilization has been noted, whereas the *Dasyus* are described as possessing horses and chariots (*ṚgVeda* 2.15.4) and also as using the chariots in war (8.24.27; 3.30.5; 2.15.4), indeed, possessing the same weapons as the Aryans.

6) Are the *Śūdras* non-Aryan? Ambedkar begins by citing P. V. Kane to the effect that they could be non-Aryans as follows:

A clear line of demarcation was kept between the *Ārya* and the *Śūdra* in the times of the *Brāhmaṇa* works and even in the *Dharmasūtras*. The *Tāṇḍya Brāhmaṇa* speaks of a mock fight: “the *Śūdra* and *Ārya* fight on a hide; out of the two they so arrange that the *Ārya* colour becomes the victor.” The *Ap. Dh. S.* (I, i.3.40–41) says that a *brahmacārin* if he cannot himself eat all the food he has brought by begging, may keep it near an *Ārya* (for his use) or he may give it to a *Śūdra* who is a *dāsa* (of his teacher). Similarly, Gautama x.69 used the word “*anārya*” for *Śūdra*. (1970: 112; Kane: 35)

The key point Ambedkar proposes here is replacing the Aryan/non-Aryan distinction with that of “two categories of Aryans, the Vedic and the non-Vedic” (113). Once this proposal is entertained, the problem of *Dāsa* and *Dasyu*, and later of the *Śūdra*, appears in a new light. Ambedkar first presents evidence that seems to support P. V. Kane’s position (Ambedkar: 112), but ultimately finds it hard to reconcile Kane’s position with the following pieces of evidence: (1) Several texts speak of all

the four *varṇas* in a sacrificial context<sup>9</sup>, specifically including the *Sūdra* (Ambedkar: 112); (2) *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 4.1–2 implies the right to Vedic studies on part of *Sūdras*; (3) Both the *Bharadvāja Śrauta Sūtra* (5.28) and *Kātyāyana Śrauta Sūtra* (1.4.16) refer to the *Sūdra*'s participation in Vedic ritual; (4) *Mīmāṃsāsūtra* (6.1.27) explicitly recognizes this as the position of *Bādari*; (5) Hindu mythology preserves accounts of such access to sacrificial ritual on the part of the *Sūdra* (Ambedkar: 115); (6) The *Manusmṛti* provides for generational transformation of *brāhmaṇas* into *śūdras* and vice versa through *jātyutkarṣa* and *jātyapakarṣa* (or change in one's *varṇa* status over generations through hypergamy and hypogamy). And (7) the *Arthaśāstra* (3.13) explicitly acknowledges the *Sūdra* as an *Ārya*. Such persistent evidence is easier to reconcile with the view that the divide between *Dāsas* and *Dasyus*, and the *Aryans*, was one between *Vedic* and *non-Vedic Aryans* rather than between *Aryan* and *non-Aryan* (Ambedkar: 112–118).

7) Are the *Dāsas* described as slaves in the *R̥gVeda*? According to Ambedkar: "It is true that the word *Dasa* is used in the *Rig Veda* in the sense of slave or servant. But the word in this sense occurs in only 5 places and no more. But even if it did occur more than five times, would it prove that the *Shudras* were made slaves? Unless and until it is proved that the two were the same people, the suggestion is absurd. It is contrary to known facts" (118). The fact that the word *Dāsa* later came to mean a slave may not by itself indicate such a status of the original people, for a form of the word "*Aryan*" also means a slave: "Just as the English word *slave* originally denoted a captive Slav, the Finnish word *orja* 'slave' denoted a captive *Aryan*" (Parpola: 1950). The Sanskrit word *svāmī*, which literally means master, was used to refer to the indentured Indians in South Africa, with a slave-like status, in its corrupt form as *samis*, in a fascinating semantic somersault.

8) Are the *Dāsas* the same as *Sūdras*? Ambedkar thinks not because slavery was practiced by a cross section of the *Aryans* as indicated by verses of the *R̥gVeda* (7.86.7; 8.19.36; 8.56.3) (Ambedkar: 119–120).

There is, apart from these refutations, a large mass of evidence pertaining to the status of the *Sūdra* in ancient India which is difficult to reconcile with the view that the defeated *Dāsas* and *Dasyus* socially reincarnated as *Sūdras*, for such a view depicts the *Sūdra* as living and lurking on the margins of society—a broken human being. However, according to Ambedkar, such a view is incomplete. According to the *Brāhmaṇas*, the *Ratnis* played a key role in the investiture of the king, and

<sup>9</sup> *AtharvaVeda* 19.32.8; 19.62.1; *Vājasaneyi Samhitā* 18.48; 20.17; 18.48.

“one of the Ratnis was always a Shudra” (Ambedkar: 118); in the description of such a ceremony in later times, in the *Nitimayūkha* of Nīlakaṇṭha, all the four *varṇas* participated in the consecration of the king; Śūdras were present at the coronation of Yudhiṣṭhira, whereas four Brahmins and three Śūdras along with others are to hold ministerial positions according to the Śāntiparva of the *Mahābhārata*; *Maitrāyaṇī Saṃhitā* (4.2.7.10) and *Pañcaviṃśa Brāhmaṇa* (6.1.11) speak of wealthy Śūdras whereas “Shudras were members of the two political assemblies of ancient times, namely, the Janapada and Paura and as a member of these the Shudras was entitled to special respect even by a Brahmin” (Ambedkar: 119).

Another point on which Ambedkar focuses is the distribution of terms. He notes that the word Śūdra occurs only once in the *RgVeda* and then too in a context where Dāsas and Dasyus “have no place” (111), whereas these two words occur fifty-four and seventy-eight times respectively. As these words in their Vedic connotation rarely appear later, Ambedkar suggests that the Dāsas and Dasyus were absorbed among the Aryans, and the Śūdras, who are so prominent in later literature, must be considered quite distinct from them.

This point seems to somewhat beg the question, but the points raised by Ambedkar earlier have received increasing support from scholars over the years. For instance he states, following Max Müller, that in the text called “Samskara Ganapati there is an express provision declaring the Shudra to be eligible for Upanayana” (114). Four similar texts have since been identified by K. Satchidananda Murty (19–20).

The seventh and final proposition runs as follows: “The Aryans cherished colour prejudice and therefore formed the *Chaturvarṇya* whereby they separated the white race from the black race such as the Dasas and Dasyus” (Ambedkar: 58). Ambedkar offers a brief as well as detailed rebuttal. He says briefly,

Again to say that institution of *Chaturvarṇya* is a reflexion of the innate colour prejudice of the Aryans is really to assert too much. If colour is the origin of class distinction, there must be four different colours to account for the different classes which comprise *Chaturvarṇya*. Nobody has said what those four colours are and who were the four coloured races who were welded together in *Chaturvarṇya*. As it is, the theory starts with only two opposing people, Aryas and Dasas—one assumed to be white and the other assumed to be dark. (75–76)

This response receives surprising confirmation from P. V. Kane who points out that “in the earliest period we find the word *varṇa* associated only with Dāsa and Ārya. Though the words Brāhmaṇa and Kṣatriya

occur frequently in the *ṚgVeda* the word *varṇa* is *not* used in connection with them, even in the *Puruṣasūkta* (*ṚgVeda* 10.90) where the words *Brāhmaṇa*, *Rājanya*, *Vaiśya* and *Śūdra* occur the word *varṇa* is *not* used” (27, emphasis added). Other scholars have noted that when a four-fold correlation is established, the four colors designate the “four directions identified by white, black, red, yellow according to which the participants were arranged during Vedic *yajña*,” more like the “colors” of a regiment as it were (Klostermaier: 334; see Bernstorff). This calls for a more detailed examination of the concept of *varṇa*, which constitutes a final step in this on-going enterprise. The word possesses several meanings, one of which is color, and the fact that the caste system is known in Hinduism as *varṇa-dharma* or *varṇa-vyavasthā* is naturally suggestive of an association, perhaps seductively so. According to Ambedkar, however, the “Aryan race theory is so absurd that it ought to have been dead long ago” (76). According to him, one explanation of its longevity lies in the support it receives from Brahmin scholars. At the moment, however, we are concerned with his second explanation:

The second explanation why the Aryan race theory is not dead is because of the general insistence by European scholars that the word *Varna* means *colour* and the acceptance of that view by a majority of the Brahmin scholars. Indeed, this is the mainstay of the Aryan theory. There is no doubt that as long as this interpretation of the *Varna* continues to be accepted, the Aryan theory will continue to live. This part of the Aryan theory is therefore very important and calls for fuller examination. (76–77)

The heavy semantic dependence of western scholarship on the word *varṇa* understood as color is too patent to require documentation (see Basham 1989: 26–27). One may therefore immediately turn to Ambedkar’s critique. First, he identifies the number of times the word *varṇa* occurs in the *ṚgVeda*. According to him it occurs twenty-two times. As a second step, he distinguishes between two contexts in which the word occurs—whether in relation to the gods as mentioned in the *ṚgVeda* or in relation to human beings. Out of the twenty-two occurrences, seventeen are identified as occurring “in reference to deities such as Ushas, Agni, Soma, etc.” (78). Thus one is left with “four and at the most five places in the *Rig Veda* where the word is used in reference to human beings: 1.104.2; 1.179.6; 2.12.4; 3.34.5; 9.71.2” (78). As a third step he examines all the five individual occurrences and concludes that in no case does it bear out the thesis (78–79).

The fourth step Ambedkar takes is innovative, in that he brings a new horizon of meaning to bear on the word. He says that as the “evidence of

the Rig Veda is quite inconclusive,...it will be a great help to know if the word occurs in the literature of the Indo-Iranians and if so, in what sense" (79). He proceeds to note that "the word Varna does occur in the Zend Avesta. It takes the form of *Varana* or *Varena*. It is used specifically in the sense of 'Faith, Religious doctrine, Choice of creed or belief.' It is derived from the root *Var* which means to put faith in, to believe in. One comes across the word *Varana* or *Varena* in the Gathas about six times used in the sense of faith, doctrine, creed or belief" (79).<sup>10</sup> Ambedkar finds this meaning confirmed by the verbal forms in which the word occurs in the Gāthās (81). He is particularly impressed by the probative value of its following three occurrences: Yasna 30, 12, and 16 (79–80).

He is thus led to conclude: "This evidence from the Zenda Avesta as to the meaning of the word *Varna* leaves no doubt that it originally meant a class holding to a particular faith and it had nothing to do with colour or complexion" (81–82). The inclusion of Avestan evidence in the discussion by Ambedkar is innovative both in terms of method and result. It is not that Avestan evidence has not been taken into account earlier at all. It is, however, only used to confirm that "some class stratification existed in many Indo-European communities, and ancient Irān had four *pištras* or classes, comparable in some respects to those of India" (Basham 1999: 137). It has rarely been engaged, however, to shed light on the meaning of the word *varṇa*. The conclusion reached by Ambedkar in general is not supported by scholars of Indo-Iranian, for "the meanings of the various terms cited: *varna*, *aavarnaa*, and *tkaesha*...are all assumptions. The only clear meaning is that of the verb *var* (*vrniite*), which obviously means 'choose', hence *vare/ana*- 'choice'; *aauuaveenā* 'reference.' There is no evidence that any of these words mean faith, belief, etc. in the modern sense. The same holds for *tkaesha*" (P. Octor Skjaero, personal communication). Ambedkar's overall exploration of Avestan material thus remains highly conjectural, but in one respect his Avestan focus on the word *varṇa* is illuminating. For if the root-meaning of its verbal root is "choice," then it is difficult to reconcile it with a racially predetermined assignment of class on the basis of color. The apparent emphasis on the literal meaning of Vedic *varṇa* thus turns out to be a pigment of the imagination if the verbal root means choice in Avestan. If *varṇa* means the color of the skin, then it is "a fate that cannot be changed," a meaning in direct opposition to the root of the word if it means "to choose."

<sup>10</sup> Yasna Ha 30 Stanza 2; Yasna Ha 31 Stanza 11; Yasna Ha 45 Stanza 1; Yasna Ha 45 Stanza 2; Yasna Ha 48 Stanza 4; Yasna Ha 49 Stanza 3.

The treatment of the Avestan material by Ambedkar has been presented at some length as it illustrates both the originality and the limitations of Ambedkar's approach in vivid detail. Ambedkar is highly innovative in bringing this material to bear on the question as even those scholars who have found the "coincidence in language between the Avesta and the Rigveda...so striking" (Keith: 115) fail to take this obvious step. The limitation is represented by the danger of etymological conflation presented by this opportunity. The word *varṇa* is connected with the root *vr*, but the root itself has two distinct and different meanings (Mayrhofer: vol. 2, 513): (1) to choose and (2) to cover or surround. This is recognized in traditional Sanskrit grammar as well. Although it is clear that the Avestan form *varana* is derived from the sense "to choose" (Tripathi and Malaviya: 188), as is obvious from the evidence presented earlier, it is not equally obvious that the Sanskrit *varṇa* is derived from it. Although sometimes such a link is established, as for instance by Yāska (c. fifth century B.C.E.) and favored by some modern Indians (Radhakrishnan: 162), most authorities connect the word *varṇa* with the sense "to cover or surround."

The scope for conflation at the etymological level should be carefully distinguished from the scope for conflation at the semantic level, that is to say, whether the word means color or class, a conflation towards which the Indic tradition itself occasionally seems to veer (Muir: part 1, 153). Scope for even further etymological-cum-semantic confusion arises from the fact that the sense of "class" could be obtained via both the etymological prongs: as a group one *chooses* to belong to or as a group in which one is enclosed. The contribution of Ambedkar here lies not only in his creative juxtaposition of the R̥gVedic and Avestan material but also allowing the lines of confusion to be clarified once his suggestion is taken seriously and explored.

It is now time to shift gears and to focus on the assessment rather than the elaboration of the views of Ambedkar. Such an assessment of Ambedkar's seven-point thesis (identified at the beginning of this article) from a scholarly point of view yields the following conclusions:

1) Ambedkar's view that the creators of Vedic literature should be viewed as a people rather than as a race was far ahead of his times. This view is winning approval in modern Indology.

2) Ambedkar's view that the Aryans did not enter India from a point beyond India does not pass scrutiny in the light of current scholarship. *Although he is right in emphasizing that the evidence for the claim that Aryans entered India from outside India is almost entirely linguistic, he does not seem justified in dismissing it on that account.* The evidence can even be said to be formidably scientific:



This theory [was] first developed in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and has been tested extensively. If there were still need of proof, one may point to the *predictions* the theory has made, specially after its more developed form had [emerged], about 1870 CE, with the establishment of regular sound correspondences (*Lautgesetze*) by the Leipzig *Junggrammatiker* school. Such cases include the old prediction of early Greek/pre-Greek \*K<sup>W</sup> which was discovered when Mycenaean Greek was deciphered in 1948, or the prediction by the young de Saussure more than a century ago, of a set of unknown sounds. These were later called laryngeals (h1, h2, h3); they have disappeared in all known [Indo-European] languages but have affected their surroundings in typical, to some extent even predictable ways. When Hittite was finally read in 1916, h2 was still found written (in [a] word such as *peṇur* = Gk. *Pūr* = Engl. fire). (Witzel: 24)

Even in this case, however, it would be wise not to draw too overzealous a conclusion from an admission of the weakness of this link in Ambedkar's chain of argument. If Panjab is accepted as the homeland of the Vedic people, then his view would entail an Aryan *emigration* from Panjab on the basis of the Indo-European linguistic hypothesis. This is at present considered a highly unlikely scenario. It is nevertheless worth pointing out that even according to Michael Witzel, "*Theoretically*, a scenario of IE emigration from the Panjab is of course possible,--the direction of the spread of innovations cannot *easily* be determined, unless we have written materials (preferably inscriptions). However, some linguistic observations such as the distribution of languages, dialect features, substrate languages, linguistic paleontology, etc. allow to argue against Out of India scenarios" (26, emphasis in original).

3) Ambedkar's view that the differences between the Dāsas and the Dasyus, on the one hand, and the Aryans, on the other, were cultic and not racial has a lot going for it. Most modern scholars view it as containing both cultic and physical features (Parpola: 150), but even those who do so concede that they could be viewed as entirely cultic (Kane: 27).

4) Ambedkar questioned the view that the distinction between Aryans, on the one hand, and Dāsas and the Dasyus, on the other, was based on differences in complexion as reflecting difference in racial type. It is now also being called into question in serious academic discourse (Trautmann).

5) Ambedkar questions the invasion-subjugation thesis. The point holds. The Aryan advent in India is increasingly being viewed as far more complex a process (Bryant: 106–107).

6 and 7) The link between the Aryan invasion and the *varṇa* system in terms of its emergence on the basis of Śūdrification of Dāsas and Dasyus is under comprehensive challenge. Even those who forge a link between the two discount this as a correct representation of historical reality



(Sharma: 22–25). However, the view has not been abandoned in its entirety, although Ambedkar's view that *varṇa* means "class" rather than "color" or "complexion" in certain key contexts receives surprising support from no less an authority than F. B. J. Kuiper (1970: 282).

To conclude: Ambedkar's rejection of the advent of the Aryans into India is still far from being accepted in academic circles, whereas his view that this event was not a cataclysmic "racial" episode is, by contrast, widely accepted. His general tendency to emphasize the role of cultural over racial factors in the evolution of Hindu social institutions also anticipates more recent developments (Kuiper 1991: 5–8, 96).

### POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF AMBEDKAR'S VIEWS

The political implications of Ambedkar's views may now be examined after their academic assessment. On such a register it is quite obvious that Ambedkar viewed the Aryan invasion theory as providing a historical basis for subliminal or actual assertions of Brahmanical superiority. In fact Ambedkar attributed the longevity of the theory, so short on objective evidence according to him, to this very fact. He wrote:

The Aryan race theory is so absurd that it ought to have been dead long ago. But far from being dead, the theory has a considerable hold upon the people. There are two explanations which account for this phenomenon. The first explanation is to be found in the support which the theory receives from Brahmin scholars. This is a very strange phenomenon. As Hindus, they should ordinarily show a dislike for the Aryan theory with its express avowal of the superiority of the European races over the Asiatic races. But the Brahmin scholar has not only no such aversion but he most willingly hails it. The reasons are obvious. The Brahmin believes in the two-nation theory. He claims to be the representative of the Aryan race and he regards the rest of the Hindus as descendants of the non-Aryans. The theory helps him to establish his kinship with the European races and share their arrogance and their superiority. He likes particularly that part of the theory which makes the Aryan an invader and a conqueror of the non-Aryan native races. For it helps him to maintain and justify his overlordship over the non-Brahmins. (76)

Ambedkar, by refuting the Aryan invasion, was annulling the *racial* foundation which it had provided to the distinction between the higher and the lower castes and seemed to be arguing for the solidarity of the Indian community. Thus the main implication of his exercise was egalitarianism, whereas with the Hindu Right the refutation of Aryan invasion is rooted in nationalism.

It is significant that Ambedkar's book appeared in 1946. Indian independence soon followed in 1947, and "in the euphoria of independence, B. R. Ambedkar, champion of the untouchables and major critic of the Congress and Gandhi, entered into a four-year period of creative cooperation with the Congress government. On August 3, 1947 the Drafting Committee for the Constitution was set up with Ambedkar as its chairman" (Hay: 339). It is my suggestion that the concept of communal solidarity Ambedkar established by debunking the Aryan invasion may have been a factor in the position he took in the drafting of the Indian constitution. He said:

Speaking for myself, I have no doubt that the Constituent Assembly has done wisely in providing such safeguards for minorities as it has done. In this country both the majorities and minorities have followed a wrong path. It is wrong for the majority to deny the existence of minorities. It is equally wrong for the minorities to perpetuate themselves. A solution must be found which will serve a double purpose. It must recognize the existence of the minorities to start with. *It must also be such that it will enable majorities and minorities to merge someday into one.* The solution proposed by the Constituent Assembly is to be welcomed because it is a solution which serves this twofold purpose. (Hay: 342, emphasis added)

This idea that a minority could vanish as a minority is easier to conceive in a world marked by cultic or cultural differences than in one marked by racial differences. Just as the Dāsas and Dasyus disappeared among the Aryans, one day the Dalits could merge into the larger Indian society. The emphasis Ambedkar lays on this point is worth noting again: "Whether the minorities will continue or will vanish must depend on the habit of the majority. The moment the majority loses the habit of discriminating against the minority, the minorities can have no ground to exist. *They will vanish*" (Hay: 342, emphasis added).

By 1951, however, Ambedkar had concluded that the majority had lost the will to reform itself, when the Nehru cabinet withdrew its support of the Hindu Code Bill (which was passed subsequently in 1955). Ambedkar resigned on this issue, an additional factor being differences over foreign policy with Nehru. The conviction grew on him that the liberation of Dalits no longer lay within Hinduism but rather from Hinduism. The question was: What does one abandon Hinduism for?

His choice of Buddhism in this respect is well known. What is less often recognized is the extent to which Aryan vocabulary permeates Buddhism: the four "Noble" (*ariya*) Truths are so called (*ariyasacca* = *āryasatya*) as also the "Noble" Eightfold Path (Rahula: 16, 45, 50, 92–94;

Dutt: 141). The word is otherwise consequential as well (253), a fact Ambedkar was well aware of (Moon: vol. 10, 8). That Ambedkar took a non-racial view of the term *Aryan* removed a hurdle in the way of embracing Buddhism. It is difficult to visualize Phule, for instance, taking such a step, given his acceptance of the racial connotation of the term *Aryan* and its frequent occurrence in Buddhism.

One final point. The individual points made by Ambedkar regarding the Aryan invasion were academically assessed as they were presented, but a general point is in order here. Ambedkar makes an important posthumous contribution by clearing the air, as it were, over the Aryan question, whose discussion has been haunted by the specter of racism. One could easily succumb to the genetic fallacy on both sides of the camp: supporters of the theory of Aryan invasion could dismiss any opposition to it, especially when coming from Indians, as merely ultranationalistic and disregard it, whereas opponents of it could brush those who support it aside as vestigial imperialists, especially if they happen to be white. The fact that some western scholars even in the nineteenth century (Muir: part 2, 301 ff.; Figueria) and Ambedkar in the twentieth could argue for their own views suggests that the current debate must avoid getting trapped in stereotypes and be conducted at a higher level.

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